

The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Artists constantly have to make their own way. It is one of the most competitive businesses imaginable. For this reason, actors have created their own work whenever necessary to feed their souls and keep their skills sharp. Shea Pender and I have created a dance show that allowed us to perform some of our favorite movie musical dance numbers. The movies *White Christmas* (1954), *Gypsy* (1962), *The Band Wagon* (1953), *La La Land* (2016), and the stage musical *A Chorus Line* (1975) all contain beautiful dance numbers that exemplify the joy of a performer's struggles. Creating this show was a labor of love, and it taught us a great deal about how to manage both the technical and emotional aspects of becoming professional actors.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Christie Zimmerman for advising us over the course of this project, as well as four years of incomparable guidance and mentorship. So many people made this project happen- Amanda Boldt, Burton Fisher, Nick Murhling, Colleen Tovar, and our friends and families, and we are beyond grateful for all their contributions and support.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not thank my wonderful partner, Shea Pender, whose intelligence, gentleness, and grace under pressure made this project the perfect grand finale.

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Process Analysis Statement

This project has been a labor of love from beginning to end. Shea and I are both musical theatre majors, and some of our favorite material comes from the enchanting movie musicals of the Golden Age of Hollywood. Although we have different tastes in almost everything else, we share a deep affection for this genre. Performers like Gene Kelly, Vera Ellen, Cyd Charisse, Debbie Reynolds, Danny Kaye, Anne Miller, Donald O'Connor, Russ Tamblyn, and Leslie Caron were some of the biggest influences on our early love for musical theatre. Luckily, many of the show stopping dance numbers they recorded were built for two.

Over the past four years, we have had the opportunity to be a part of new musicals and plays, devised pieces, cabarets, and numerous productions. We have been asked to create our own material, revise and edit the work of others, workshop drafts, and put together performances, considering things like performance order, thematic structure, and the technical aspects of running a show. Behind the scenes of all that, we have studied in music, vocal technique, acting, song interpretation, scene work, partnering, and multiple styles of dance. This capstone represents the synthesis of all our training.

Some of our biggest concerns were building the stamina to get through the entire set list, including enough variety, and crafting an arc to the show that made some sort of sense and was entertaining. What I didn't anticipate was how difficult it would be just to learn the material. I have eighteen years of dance experience in a variety of different styles, and I have served as the dance captain on two different

productions in the past three years, which means teaching, cleaning choreography, giving notes, and working with peers in a leadership role. Translating this timeless choreography was a challenge from beginning to end.

It was important to us that we stay as true to the original material as possible. We wanted to represent these pieces the way they originally impacted us, and to accurately showcase the style and original intentions of the iconic choreographers and dancers that created them. I did not expect this process to be so frustrating and arduous, and I am walking away from this project with a new level of respect for every teacher and choreographer I've ever learned from. It is so much easier to be taught than to teach, and we taught ourselves how to teach ourselves. A few saving graces- we had two sets of eyes on the recording at all times, and YouTube has a slow motion feature. This learning process was a series of trial and error to begin with. We would learn an eight-count phrase, check the video, repeat it, check the video again, get confused, go back to the video to fix it, and inevitably realize we had reversed the combination or were oriented incorrectly in the space. We accomplished a lot with this method- most notably, "A Lovely Night," which was the first number we finished, but it was tedious and inefficient.

A major breakthrough came one day in the studio when I was working on "Music and the Mirror" alone. Michael Bennett's choreography utilizes every musical accent in the song, and the counting patterns are always changing, so it was a struggle to replicate that stylistically while I was learning the music and the choreography at the same time. When I hit a wall, I sat down with my notebook and wrote out every step in every phrase, count by count, to really break down what I

was doing, and to give myself a break from my own frustration. I don't know why I didn't think to utilize this approach earlier in the process, but it fully shifted the way we tackled the choreography from then on. This involved going back and relearning both "Music and the Mirror" and "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing," but it expedited the process after that point. It makes complete sense that putting in the grunt work of starting small, building these dances from the ground up, and focusing on accuracy of technique and musical interpretation would be the most useful strategy- this has been a lesson I am continuously relearning in all my training, so I'm not sure why it was such a major blind spot to begin with, but it significantly improved the quality of our final product, and will affect the way I approach any creative endeavors from this point forward.

Happily, I expected collaboration between Shea and myself to be much more of an obstacle than it turned out to be. Over the course of this project, we really learned how to work together in a rehearsal setting, including giving each other constructive criticism and working through obstacles of technique, fatigue, and frustration. Although I am a much more experienced dancer, Shea has a clear eye for detail, kept us on track during rehearsals, and is a truly top notch dance partner. One of my biggest challenges when it comes to partner dancing is learning how to let someone else lead, which most of our duets required. This is a challenge I will continue to work on for the rest of my career as a dancer, but being able to trust my partner to execute the choreography, never let me fall, and communicate in the studio and during performance was an enormous asset. I could not and would not have wanted to complete this project with anyone else.

We chose to open our show with "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing" which was first performed by Vera Ellen and Danny Kaye in the 1954 movie musical *White Christmas*. The dance was built by Robert Alton (with assistance from Bob Fosse), who is not known for his iconic dances, but for helping a generation of performers discover and brand their own movement styles. The major challenge of this piece was transferring the choreography from screen to stage. Whether the set was built around the choreography or the dance was choreographed to utilize the set, they worked so beautifully together in the movie that it was important to use to maintain the integrity of the original work, but also necessary to alter quite a bit, especially when it came to spacing. There was also a musical interlude in the accompanying track we used, which required a bit of finagling and original choreography on our part.

The next piece in the set was "All I Need is the Girl" from *Gypsy*, based on Paul Wallace's performance in the 1962 movie. Although there have been many film adaptations of *Gypsy*, this one was choreographed by Robert Tucker, who served as the assistant to Bob Fosse and Jerome Robbins on countless productions. He based his work in *Gypsy* on the original Broadway choreography and captured Robbins' iconic expressive, balletic style. For this dance, I served mostly as a sounding board for Shea as he taught himself the choreography. Working on this piece was when I began to realize that there was a very strong theme to our material selection, whether it was intentional or not. Every single dance is about people who want something and are seeking fulfillment, whether they think they need the "music and the mirror" or simply "the girl." Dance is a powerful tool of expression, and it is

never more poignant or exciting than when it is used to express the deepest desires. The characters we portrayed are emboldened by their aspirations, and they dance to release this exuberance, and to escape to a world of their own creation. It's true that "the best things happen while you're dancing"- that's the thing they've figured out. Truthfully, all art (or good art) is about this drive. If we didn't feel a constant longing for more, there would be no reason to create art to tell our stories, and there would certainly be no reason to dance.

This realization also helped us to build and arrange our set list. Although we initially considered adhering to a strict chronological order, this thematic interpretation of our pieces helped us decided to open the show with "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing," a playful nod to both the journeys of our characters and the purpose of our thesis. It helped us mine the emotional dynamics of each piece by focusing on what each character wanted- again, a very basic lesson from our training that we learned how to apply over the course of this process.

"Dancing in the Dark" from Vincente Minnelli's 1953 movie musical *The Band Wagon* was the most technically challenging dance of our entire set. Michael Kidd is known for the athletic choreography he set for pieces like *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* and *Can-Can*, so this romantic duet is an outlier in his body of work. On top of that, it was initially staged for Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire, who were an unusual pairing. Astaire was usually partnered with a smaller, more delicate dancer like Ginger Rogers or his sister Adele, and Charisse stands eye to eye with him, which must have been a challenge when it came to choreographing a traditional duet. This was also a challenge for us, because Shea and I are most decidedly not the

same height, and much of the partnering, including lifts, simply did not work on our bodies. Adapting the dance to our strengths and size difference took up a good portion of the rehearsal time we devoted to this number, although we eventually decided to tackle nearly all of the original choreography and partnering.

"Music and the Mirror" became my pet project over the course of this endeavor. Widely regarded as one of the most difficult sequences in the musical theatre canon, it was an intimidating piece to take on, and a task I was eager to conquer. An enlightening moment came when I decided to diversify my research on the Michael Bennett's choreography. *A Chorus Line* is nearly always produced with the original choreography, because it has become so iconic. However, the different performances I watched varied greatly. Each dancer's interpretation was an amalgamation of her emotional arc through the piece and her technical strengths, married to the structure of the original steps. This discovery allowed me a kind of freedom I'm not generally accustomed to in the dance studio. Singing and acting both leave space for a certain amount of individuality and play, but the kind of dancing I am accustomed to demands a certain level of formality and consistency. Fully exploring my own ability to interpret "Music and the Mirror" within its intended format is a project I have yet to complete. I hope to carry this sense of vitality into every piece of choreography I approach in the future.

We wrapped up our set with "A Lovely Night," from the 2016 almost-Best-Picture *La La Land*, which was choreographed by Mandy Moore, and originally inspired by much of the same body of work we drew from for the rest of our performance. Seeing this movie was the very first step we took in beginning to plan

our thesis, and it was the first dance we began to learn. *La La Land*'s existence and popularity are proof of our thesis' relevance, and hopefully signify a resurgence of this genre of performance

Even if we had rehearsed for another month, we would still be just beginning our journey with these dances and these characters. We have just started to access the magic of combining every element of the medium we are so passionate about, and more than anything, I will never again underestimate the essential nature of theatre as a collaborative art form. Even as an independent project, our performance would have been impossible without the cooperation and contributions of several generous colleagues. To remount this piece in a professional or non-educational setting would require even more. Although our process was the most essential and enriching component of this project, our product is far from final. We accomplished what we set out to do, but has only illuminated the steps we have yet to take, steps that would be impossible without the inclusion of our fellow collaborative theatre artists. I will take away many lessons from the completion of this project, but I will always remember that the most compelling part of the act of making art is the challenging truth that you are never, ever done.

Work Cited

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"The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing- Danny Kaye and Vera Ellen."

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White Christmas. Dir. Michael Curtiz. Paramount Pictures, 1954. Film.

Appendix A

Program

The Best Things Happen
While You're Dancing

An Honors Thesis presented by:
Laura Girard & Shea Pender

April 22, 2017
7:30 PM
Korsgaard Dance Studio
Ball State University

Special Thanks to:
Christie Zimmerman
Colleen Tovar
Burton Fisher
Amanda Boldt
Nick Murhling
The Honors College
The Department of Theatre & Dance

Appendix B

Facebook Event

APR
22

The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing

Public · Hosted by Shea Pender and Laura Girard

✓ Going ▼

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Saturday, April 22 at 7:30 PM - 8:30 PM
about 1 week agoBall Gym
Ball Gymnasium, Muncie, Indiana 47303

Show Map

About

Discussion

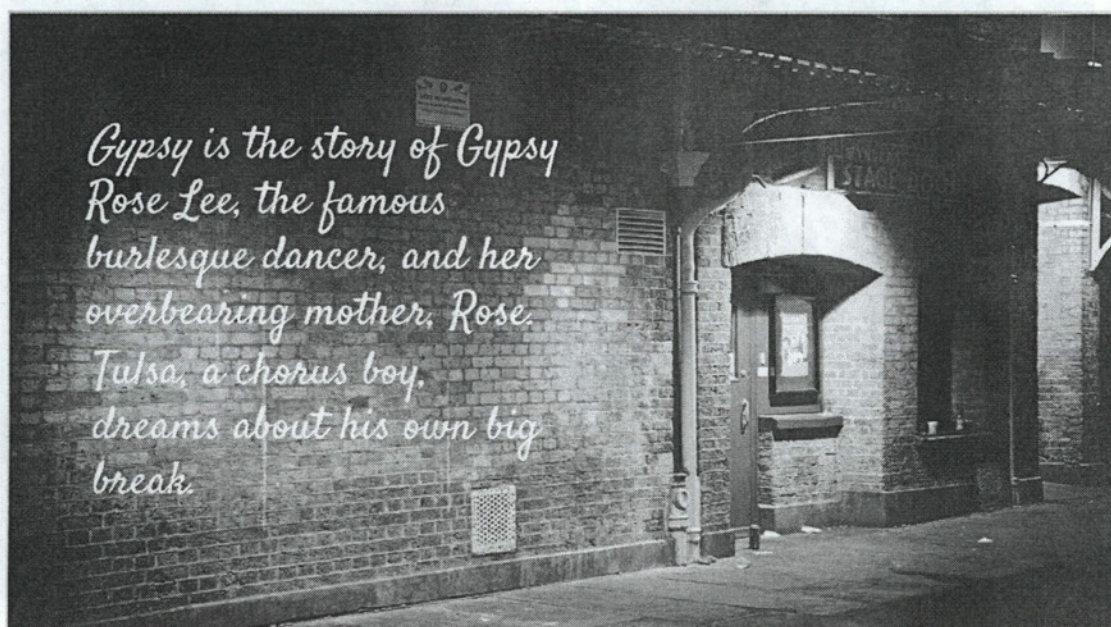
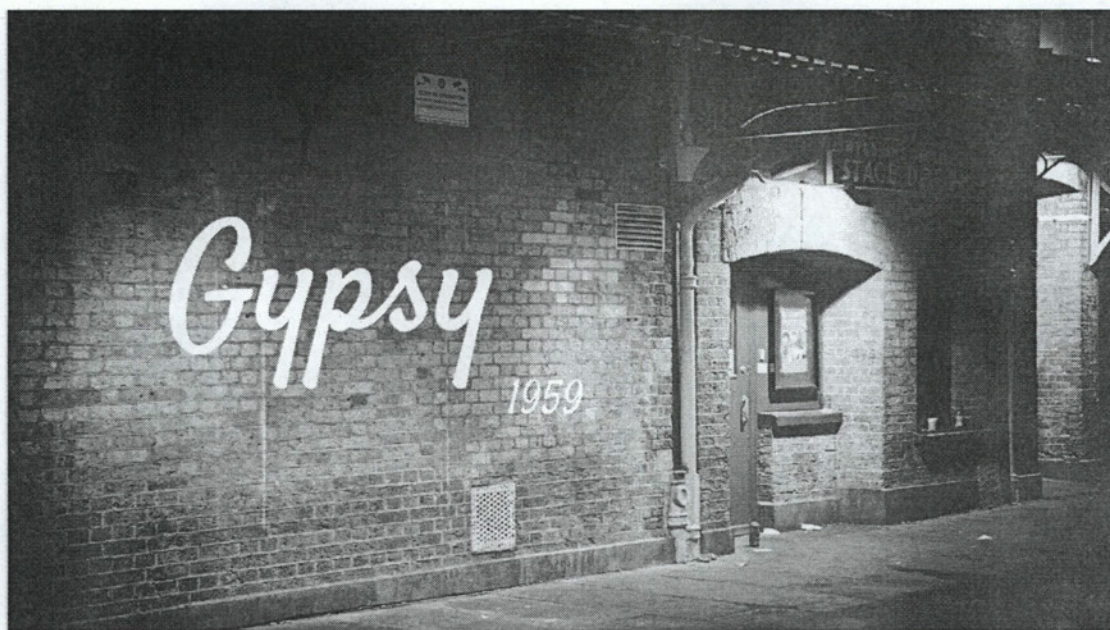
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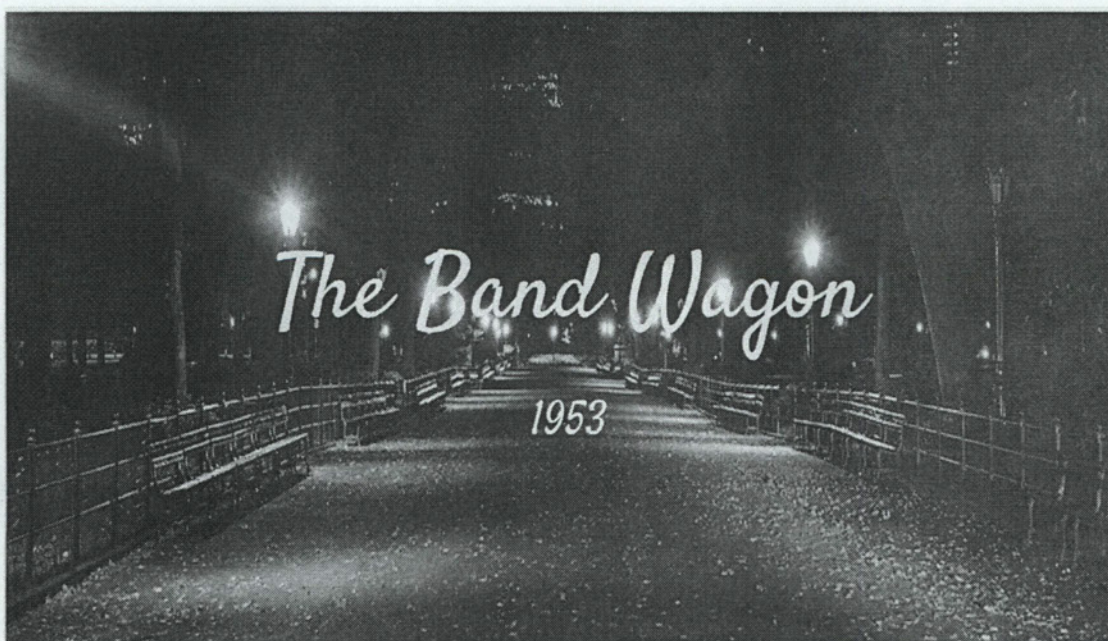
We are pleased to welcome you to a fun, relaxed evening of dance! Come to KDS and enjoy our Honors Thesis (we won't get too sappy, we promise)!

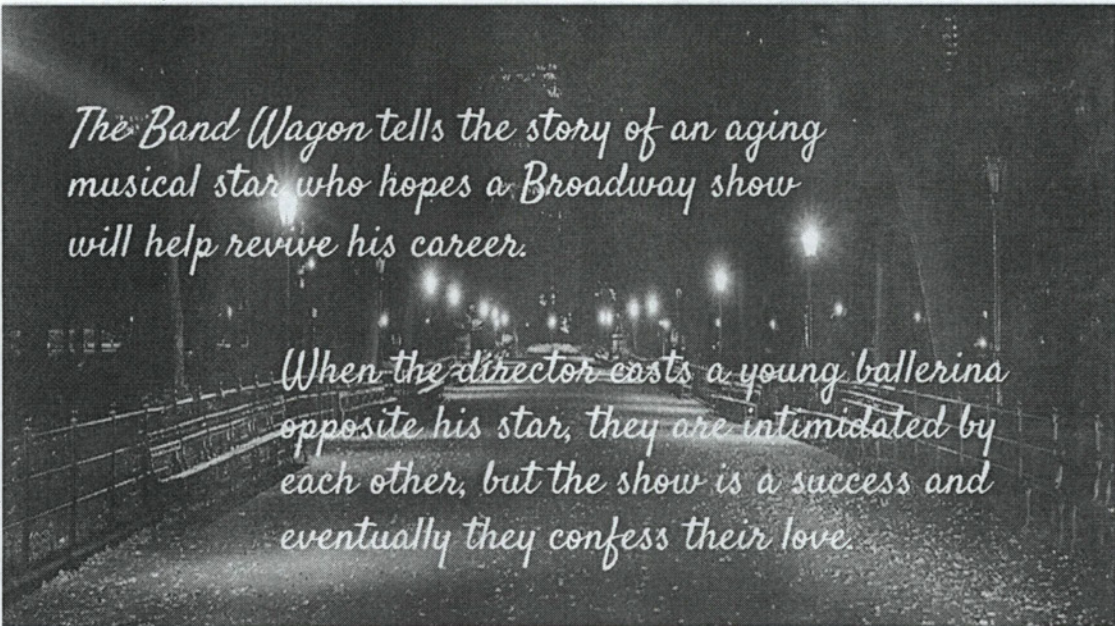
Appendix C

Google Slides










The Band Wagon tells the story of an aging musical star who hopes a Broadway show will help revive his career.

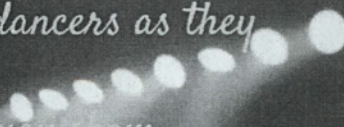
When the director casts a young ballerina opposite his star, they are intimidated by each other, but the show is a success and eventually they confess their love.





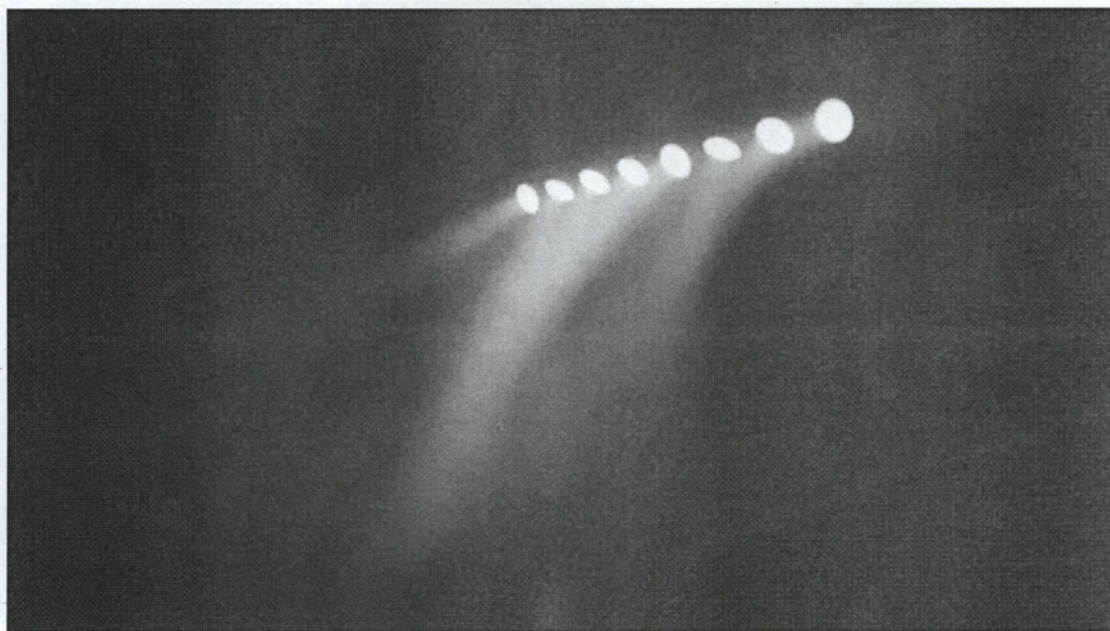
A Chorus Line

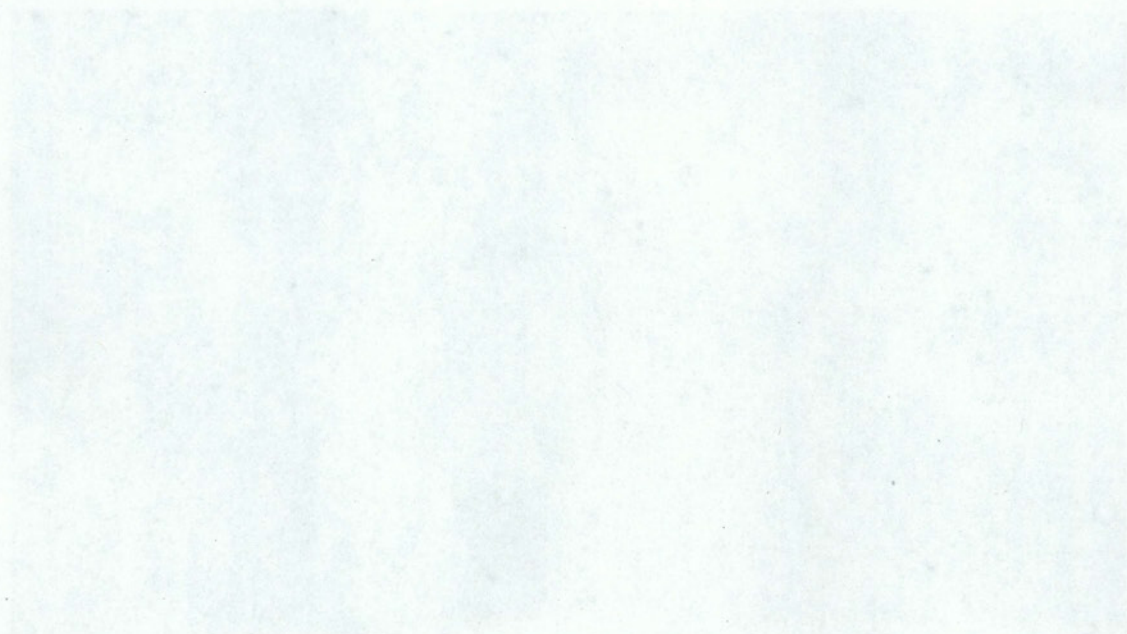
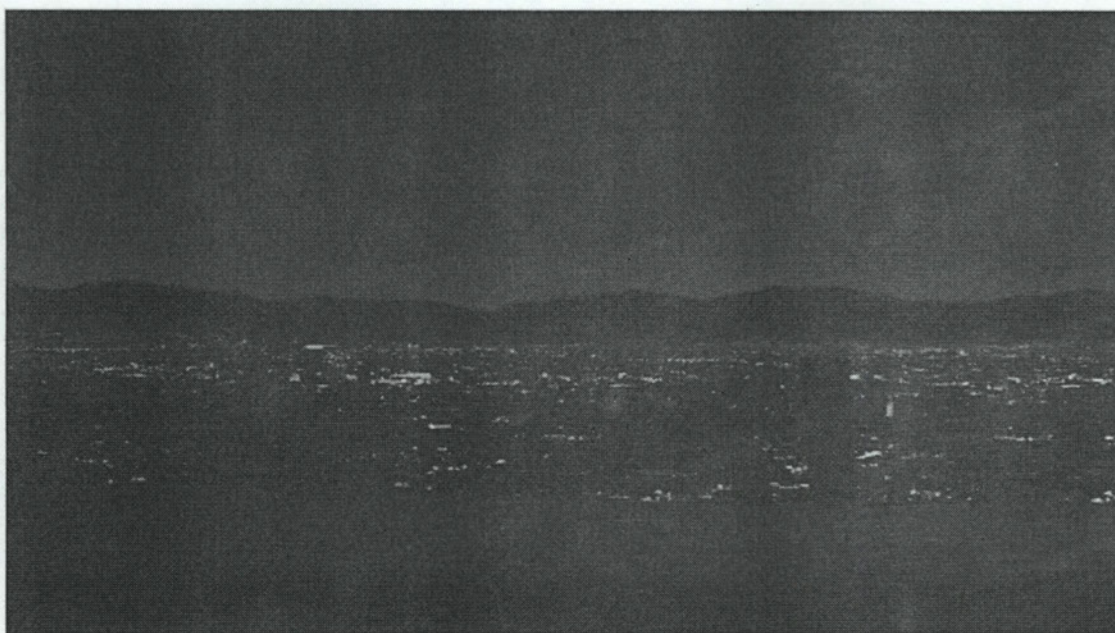
1975



A Chorus Line follows 17 dancers as they vie for positions in the ensemble of a new Broadway show.

Zach, the director, confronts Cassie about her past success, telling her that she is too good for the chorus and doesn't belong here.





Appendix D

Link to Full Performance

<https://youtu.be/ZboSCj1fEao>